



[V I Lenin, 1870 – 1924](#)

Three Sources and Component Parts

Lenin's "[The 3 Sources and 3 Component Parts of Marxism](#)" (attached; download linked below) is a favourite because it is very concise - only four pages long - and very illuminating.

But it also contains mistakes, and it encourages mistakes.

For example, Lenin writes: *"... there is nothing resembling "sectarianism" in Marxism, in the sense of its being a hidebound, petrified doctrine, a doctrine which arose away from the highroad of development of world civilisation."*

Which is correct.

But Lenin immediately follows with: *"The Marxian doctrine is omnipotent because it is true. It is complete and harmonious,*

and provides men with an integral world conception” - in other words, he says, it is fixed, hidebound and petrified.

This pair of sentences constitutes a self-contradiction by Lenin. What happened to the “highroad of development of world civilisation” in between the two statements? Did it come to a dead end (i.e. was it “completed”)?

“The philosophy of Marxism is materialism,” writes Lenin, and not *“old and rotten idealism.”* This is philosophy reduced to catechism, or of pat answers to “Frequently Asked Questions”. It is not much use, not even as propaganda. It is so much simplified as to be dangerous.

Actually, Marx himself opposed the concept of a “doctrine” that would be “omnipotent because true”, or “complete”. Marx’s work was not complete in his lifetime, and if he had been blessed with two lifetimes, he would surely have left, not less, but more like double the amount of revolutionary work-in-progress. The more work Marx did, the larger was the frontier that he opened up.

Lenin writes: *“Where the bourgeois economists saw a relation of things (the exchange of one commodity for another), Marx revealed a relation of men.”* This is true. Marx was concerned with the men, more than with the things. This is why it is necessary to be careful with the word “materialism”.

Lenin writes: *“The doctrine of surplus value is the cornerstone of Marx's economic theory.”* This is only half true. Surplus

Value is not merely the cornerstone of some discrete part of Marxism called “economic theory”. It is much more than that. The sale of Labour-Power to a capitalist at the point of production, and the subsequent expropriation of the entire product of the worker’s labour by the capitalist, is the source of Surplus Value. It is also the source of class differentiation and class conflict. It is the reason for the necessity of the development of a collective popular Subject of History around the working-class cause.

In short, it is good to examine the abstract parts of any phenomenon, including “Marxism”, but only if one is to proceed to a synthesis, or concretisation of these parts into a dynamically-comprehended whole. That is how dialectics works. That is how an examination of the sources and component parts of Marxism should be concluded, but in this instance Lenin does not quite succeed in doing so. Instead, he leaves the parts as parts. He leaves us with a list of ingredients, but not the finished cake.

Lenin writes: *“While increasing the dependence of the workers on capital, the capitalist system creates the great power of united labour.”*

Capitalism does create a working class, and organises it as a labour-force, but it does not unite it politically. This, like the previous examples, shows the danger of over-simplification. Lenin was no doubt writing for workers, and brevity was his aim, and he possessed an extraordinary ability to compress difficult ideas into a few, clear words. Yet even Great Lenin,

the most famous advocate of determined, deliberate political organisation, including vanguard organisation of professional revolution (e.g. in “[What is to be Done?](#)”) could be tempted to undermine himself in the over-pursuit of simplification.

Lenin recovers this particular matter of organisation in the document’s concluding paragraph, where he even mentions South Africa (this was in 1913):

“Independent organisations of the proletariat are multiplying all over the world, from America to Japan and from Sweden to South Africa. The proletariat is becoming enlightened and educated by waging its class struggle; it is ridding itself of the prejudices of bourgeois society; it is rallying its ranks ever more closely and is learning to gauge the measure of its successes; it is steeling its forces and is growing irresistibly.”

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [3 Sources and 3 Component Parts of Marxism, 1913, Lenin](#).
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